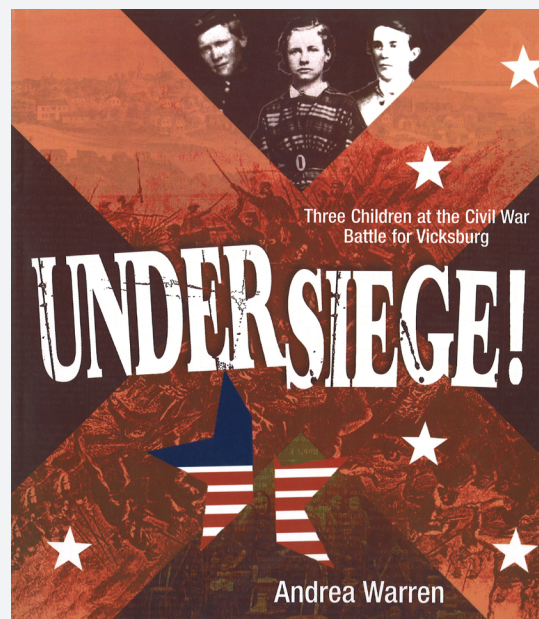
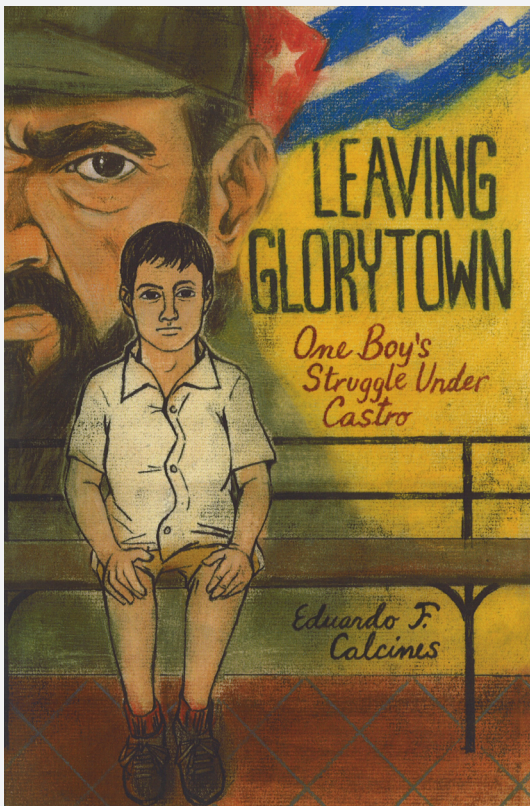


First Opinion: Taking Revolution Personally

Calcines, Eduardo F. *Leaving Glorytown: One Boy's Struggle Under Castro*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009.

Warren, Andrea. *Under Siege! Three Children at the Civil War Battle for Vicksburg*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009.

Karen Chandler



Reconstructing the personal vision and experience of historical personages is a common way of making the past tangible. Personal narratives encourage readers' engagement with the past in ways that a simple chronicle of facts does not. Readers can gain understanding of past events as they read of the actions, decisions, and emotional responses of individualized characters, perhaps characters with which they share key attributes. Such characters serve as means for readers to negotiate and comprehend troubling historical occurrences. Yet the effectiveness of this approach depends on an author's careful shap-

ing of personal experience and its social contexts. Drawing on the testimony of various adult and child eyewitnesses, Andrea Warren's *Under Siege: Three Children at the Civil War Battle for Vicksburg* ably retells the story of a major battle in the Civil War. Focusing on his middle-class family's hardship during Fidel Castro's regime, Eduardo F. Calcines's *Leaving Glorytown: One Boy's Struggle Under Castro* offers a horrifying picture of political repression, but the book ultimately fails to portray the complexity of Cuba's broader society.

Calcines opens *Leaving Glorytown* with the assertion that "God made everything and everyone. He even made Fidel Castro," thus early establishing his acrimony toward the Castro regime. Castro and his fellow Communists are the villains of the book, vile disrupters of the middle-class Calcines family's respectable lives. The young Eduardo is a clever, assertive boy struggling to understand the drastic changes in Cuba. He portrays his parents, grandparents, sister, and a network of uncles, aunts, cousins, and friends affectionately, seeking to balance their continual victimization with demonstrations of their integrity. When a gang disrupts the family's Noche Buena celebration, the Calcines men stand up for their right to observe tradition. They act honorably, but they must desist once it becomes clear that the gang, which is apparently sponsored by the state, will use violence to suppress the celebration. Calcines's father explains to him, "You have to learn to think, not just to act. They *want* us to fight back. That way they can arrest us" (33). Yet Eduardo learns that because of Castro, Calcines men are sent to prison for simply doing their jobs and maintaining an uncle's successful business. He struggles to understand the Communist revolution's paradoxes of displacing and disempowering self-supporting citizens, converting their families to dependents on an ineffective welfare state, and indoctrinating youth to aim for low-paying jobs and social immobility. According to Calcines, Castro's regime reduces his family to poverty, sickens his father, makes Eduardo the target of harassing teachers and classmates, and prevents him from keeping his girlfriend (because she becomes one of the indoctrinated ones). Although Eduardo and his parents hold on to the hope that they can move to the United States, a close friend who plans to stay in Cuba says of his own future, "I don't know what I see...Just...nothing" (174).

Calcines offers a devastating portrait of the effects of political repression, but his book boils nearly everything down to a melodramatic struggle between the evil Communists and the good Cubans. *Leaving Glorytown* exposes the shortcomings of unconditionally treating didactic autobiography as history. The book does not acknowledge the socio-economic conditions that permitted Castro's rise to power and the longevity of his regime. The youthful Eduardo's perspective is understandably limited, and such naïve protagonists are common in personal narratives. Yet the most effective works present naiveté through an ironic narrative lens that invites readers to fill in the gaps in a character's limited vision. Careful framing of Eduardo's experience is largely and regrettably missing from *Leaving Glorytown*. Calcines normalizes his perspective, stereotyping anyone who conflicts with him and beloved family members. Peers who embrace communism are fools; a longtime

neighbor, La Natividad, an unmarried woman who practices Santeria, is a monster. For him, the sounds of her religion, a blend of African spirituality and Catholicism, are “howling and pounding” that regularly disturb his sleep. By contrast, his family’s loud card game is “one of the most civilized customs of Cuban life” (36). Though he sees his family as representative of Cuban victimization, Calcines fails to place its troubles in a larger framework of social injustice and reform. When a Communist cousin tells him the United States is not perfect because black Americans and Latinos face discrimination, Calcines remarks, “We are white...We have European blood” (176).

Under Siege overcomes the problem of limited perspective, re-presenting the messy history of an extended military campaign and efforts to withstand it. The book relies on multiple, competing perspectives drawn from biographies, interviews, and diaries of those involved in the siege. Through her mingling of Union and Confederate voices, Warren helps readers visualize not only the hard-fought, months-long battle between General Ulysses S. Grant’s and General John Pemberton’s forces, but also the valiant effort of residents of Vicksburg, Mississippi, to survive and resist the Union campaign. The book juxtaposes the unfolding story of what occurred in the city with that of Grant’s evolving military strategy and movements and that of the Confederate Army’s response. For each narrative thread, Warren highlights individual voices that elaborate on or illustrate her general descriptions of events and their impact: in the Vicksburg sections, the voices of the children Lucy McRae and Willie Lord are prominent, along with those of adults such as socialite Emma Balfour; in the Grant sections, his son Frederick’s voice is prominent, complemented by observations of ranked and unranked soldiers.

The narrative smoothly shifts from one site to another and offers carefully composed views of Grant’s relationship with his men, of enslaved African-Americans’ ambivalent interactions with white masters, and perhaps most memorably, of the oppression and danger of Vicksburg children’s and adults’ cave dwelling during the final months of the campaign. In each case, Warren is mindful of details that animate the past for today’s readers. In addition to the book’s many photos, Warren has selected telling quotes from her sources that illuminate their condition. For example, Warren mentions that “Willie’s mother and youngest sister had a very close call one day when two large shells fell nearby and exploded simultaneously, filling the air with flames and smoke. Willie’s mother tried to soothe her four-year-old daughter, saying ‘Don’t cry, my darling. God will protect us.’ To which the girl replied that she was afraid that God had already been killed” (87).

A rare flaw in *Under Siege* is Warren’s failure to distance herself from the bias of some of her sources. In one instance, she lists the social functions of African-American slaves, noting “They worked as cooks, maids, butlers, and drivers, and as mammies, who cared for their white owners’ children” (16). Her use of “mammies” legitimates a demeaning term that connotes slaveholders’ limited view of black women as nursemaids for white children. Still, this slip occurs only once; Warren’s handling of her sources is usually deft

and informative. *Under Siege* is a model for reconstructing history, for it summons up the multi-layered reality of historical events. Like *Leaving Glorytown*, *Under Siege* emphasizes the importance of the individual voice in history-writing, but it much more consistently portrays the complexity of a world composed of contingent personal visions and social movements.

About the Author

Karen Chandler, an associate professor of English at the University of Louisville, has published essays on American and African-American literature and is working on a book about the treatment of African-American historical experience in young adult and children's literature.